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The 6th International Research Conference: Consciousness Reframed: Qi and Complexity

Sponsored by Planetary Collegium; School of Software, Peking University; Central Academy of Fine Arts; Central Conservatory of Music; Beijing Normal University
25-27 November 2005; Beijing, China

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The 6th International Research Consciousness Reframed Conference: Qi and Complexity convened from November 25-27, 2004 in Beijing, China. An annual conference generating from the Planetary Collegium (University of Plymouth, UK), it was co-sponsored this year by the School of Software of Peking University; the Central Academy of Fine Arts; the Central Conservatory of Music; and the Beijing Normal University. It is important to note that these many institutions were brought together by many of their deans and program chairs, but the event was largely organized and run by Drs. Roy Ascott, Director of the Planetary Collegium, and Kenneth Fields, Peking University.

As in all Consciousness Reframed conferences, artists, scholars, and scientists give formal papers, performances, and/or demonstrations on such wide-ranging subjects as robotics, neuroscience, 3D animation, mythology and spirituality, web interfaces, consciousness, and game studies, to name just a few of the many topics discussed. This year, since it was held in Beijing, a location Roy Ascott calls the "interface between not only eastern and western culture . . . [but] between ancient and progressive knowledge" ("Introduction to Abstracts"), the conference took on the special themes of Qi and Complexity. While complexity may be a familiar term to most readers, Qi may be less so. Difficult to define (a whole evening lecture was devoted to explaining it), Qi was best encapsulated by Chinese researcher Wengao Huang (Zhejiang University) in his presentation, "How Far Are Chinese Arts from Media Art?," as "the theory of circular causality, which is at the essence of the universe and abundant in life." That said, many of the presentations were either wholly devoted to it or touched on it in some way.

While it is impossible to review all of those presentations of merit, a few representative of the exceptional quality one generally finds at Consciousness Reframed conferences should be mentioned. For example, Korean artist Semi Ryu's "Ritualizing Interactive Media: From Motivation to Activation" looked critically at the notion of interaction,

particularly at the blurred boundaries between user and object in ritual, which she argues our "desire" for is as ancient as it is instinctive. Ritual's goal, she claimed, is to "overcome the separation and become one" and in the process interactivity undergoes a primary passage from the physical to the spiritual.

In "Consciousness, Connectivity and Coherence: A Biophotonic Perspective," Roy Ascott argued that artists working in the 21st Century may "become concerned with finding ways to allow us to sense the invisible in the visible." Citing the ideas of Werner Heisenberg, Marcel Duchamp, Heinz von Foerster, and Francisco Varela, he posited that "reality is constructed, meaning is negotiated worlds built through participation." Atoms, neurons, and genes exemplify those elements that were once invisible and unknown but now accepted. From this point, Ascott moved to the main focus of his topic, biophotonic light, which represents what Hans-Peter Durr calls "immaterial connectedness." Ascott concluded with the potential of vegetal and virtual reality coming together to produce a new way of seeing and knowing.

Two excellent readings edging close to performances were given by Marcus Boon (Canada; "Tickets that Exploded: Psychoactive Drugs and *Autopoesis*") and Claudia Westermann (Germany; "Greed. Love. Wisdom. And Labeling the Self"). In the former, Boon explored what he called "consciousness and the phenomenology of intoxication" specifically in the works of Henri Michaux and William Burroughs. In the latter, Westermann looked at the "processes by which [we] . . . reach wisdom" arguing that brains learn by stretching forth in chaotic systems.

Scientists, such as Neil Greenberg, added to the discourse between the arts and science. His presentation, entitled "Truth in the Brain: The Neuroethology of Belief," discussed "two general processes critical to doubt and the veracity of belief" . . . "used to determine truth: correspondence and coherence." As he told the audience, Truth "represents a high confidence in our beliefs including a sense of self." Likewise, John Dougherty, LeAnne Dougherty, Mateja de Leonni Stanonik, and Charles Licata's "Neurobiology of the Aware Ego" gave a powerful presentation that discussed the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) of the brain and its influence upon Alzheimer's Disease and hence its relation to consciousness.

Two noteworthy projects were presented. First, Tony Lewis-Brooks' work described in "Soundscapes: Multisensory Reciprocity through Subliminal Non-Control" saw the use of motion tracking technology for "enhanc[ing] the senses" in "real-time causal interaction" during rehabilitation therapy. Chris Nelson's project, discussed in "An Exploration of Bah: Spiritual Experience in Virtual Reality," demonstrated a virtual game environment that explored the mystical treatise, *The Seven Valleys*, key to the Baha'i faith.

Lively debates followed those presentations involving robots and consciousness. First, Owen Holland's presentation, entitled "Methods in Machine Consciousness: The Need for a Synthetic Phenomenology," asked, "What is machine consciousness?," and laid out the problem involving the "assess[ment of] the internal processes of the machine." He ran aground quickly when he defined art as "decorating," which, of course, belies the complexity and required intellect and sensibility for creating and understanding it. That definition did not sit well with the numerous artists in attendance. That Holland came at art secondarily himself can be understood since he is a scientist; however, anywhere in his argument we could have substituted science for art and come up with the same conclusion about science as he did for art. And finally, he argued that consciousness has evolved from a specific set of circumstances dependent upon sexual and natural selection. Yet the robot he described in his project could not have benefited from these

circumstances, and still he talked about its consciousness. Thus, it was not clear if he was arguing that the robot would still develop consciousness, or something else instead.

Just as lively was the discussion that came from Shigeki Sugiyama's talk, "Rainbow in Consciousness," which described a sensory enriched robot. Like Holland, Sugiyama wondered if such a creation has consciousness or not. Arguing that "consciousness exists in the brain, is raised in the process of growing from baby to an adult, becomes identifiable by itself as a quantity of consciousness grows and expands, and can exist in the brain without any stimulation from the outer world," he arrived at the conclusion that "consciousness itself will not exist as a real entity physically, but it [is] a phenomenon induced by the neuron activities . . . like a rainbow seen with Mist in the air and by reflected sunshine." Questions arose about the place for spirituality in such a model. One does not need to wonder where the paranormal belongs.

Accompanying the presentations was a media arts exhibition held at the Red Gate Gallery featuring works by Semi Ryu (KOR), Margarete Jahrmann and Max Moswitzer (CH/AT), Victoria Vesna, Norbert Herber, Margaret Dolinsky, and Diana Gromola (USA), Rees Archibald (UK), Katia Maciel (BR), Robert Lisek (PL), and Stefania Serafin and Michel Guglielmi (IT/ FR). Each of the three days of conference was punctuated by special events. On the first evening Ken Rose gave his lecture on the nature of Qi. The following evening saw a standout concert of digital music featuring many of the conference presenters as well as local musicians from The China Electronic Music Center. The final evening took the participants to the Summer Palace, the place where emperors once escaped the heat and noise of the city, for a special dinner and entertainment by musicians expert in traditional Chinese instruments. That we ended the conference in such a way belied the reality Beijing presented: A city in the midst of transition and hungry for the new—seeming so very far away from the concept of the ancient tradition of Qi but just right for a contemporary study of complexity.

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